



# CLOSING THE LITERACY GAP FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

MAYOR RAHM EMANUEL'S

## ADA 25 LITERACY TASK FORCE

NOVEMBER 2016





## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Letter from the Commissioner</b> .....	4
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	5
<b>Preface</b> .....	7
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	11
<b>Priority 1:</b> Strengthen the teaching of language and literacy to all children from birth to 3rd grade, especially those who struggle with reading.....	11
<b>Recommendation 1a:</b> Select one or two high-quality reading programs for use in the early grades throughout Chicago Public Schools .....	11
<b>Recommendation 1b:</b> Identify an effective set of instructional interventions with struggling readers for use in every Chicago public elementary school. ....	11
<b>Recommendation 1c:</b> Ensure that every pre-k to 3rd grade teacher receives intensive, on-going professional development in literacy instruction and reading interventions. ....	12
<b>Recommendation 1d:</b> Engage parents to support their children’s language and literacy development from birth to 3rd grade.....	12
<b>Recommendation 1e:</b> Increase mental health support to children from birth to 3rd grade.....	12
<b>Priority 2:</b> Improve the way that schools identify and support students in pre-kindergarten to 3rd grade who struggle with reading, especially those with disabilities.....	13
<b>Recommendation 2a:</b> Create a universal system for identifying reading difficulties in grades K-3 .....	13
<b>Recommendation 2b:</b> Ensure that every elementary school has in place an effective Multi-Tiered System of Supports .....	13
<b>Recommendation 2c:</b> Update the evaluation process for identifying specific learning disabilities to be consistent with research and federal and state guidelines.....	14
<b>Recommendation 2d:</b> Improve the quality of pre-k to 3rd grade special education instruction in Chicago public elementary schools .....	15
<b>Priority 3:</b> Improve the delivery of services to students with disabilities from birth to preschool .....	15
<b>Recommendation 3a:</b> Improve data-sharing between City of Chicago early learning systems and State of Illinois birth to age three Early Intervention.....	16
<b>Recommendation 3b:</b> Support parents in scaffolding their children’s language development from birth to age three.....	16
<b>Recommendation 3c:</b> Provide special education services on-site to children enrolled in city-funded community preschool programs. ....	17
<b>Recommendation 3d:</b> Give children with disabilities equal access to full-day pre-kindergarten.....	17
<b>Recommendation 3e:</b> Change pre-kindergarten staffing structures to provide more access to students with disabilities .....	17
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	17

## LETTER FROM THE COMMISSIONER

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Dear Mayor Emanuel,

Last year we marked the 25th anniversary of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, one of the nation's most significant pieces of civil rights legislation.

As Chicago leaders came together to reflect on our nation's great progress towards accessibility and inclusion, it was also clear that there are many areas where the promise of the ADA has yet to be realized. A case in point is the educational outcomes for our city's students with disabilities, who face a 43% achievement gap in reading as compared to students without disabilities.

While the reading test scores have soared overall, the scores for over 57,000 students with disabilities has languished for years at sub-par rates. Data has shown that the widespread underachievement of our students with disabilities in reading has a cascading effect on graduation, drop-out and employment rates.

In response, you created a Mayoral Task Force on Literacy, charged with providing you with findings on root causes and educational best practices for narrowing our city's reading achievement gap. Since your call to action, twenty Chicago early childhood and special education practitioners, policy makers, academics, and philanthropists have worked tirelessly to develop these set of recommendations for change.

The Task Force believes that with your leadership, we can reduce the reading proficiency gap for 3rd graders by half by 2021 if we take the proactive steps outlined in this report. We know this will take hard work and collaborative effort, but we owe it to our children and the future of Chicago to ensure that the ADA's promise of opportunity, independence and inclusion is fulfilled for all our students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen Tamley". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Karen Tamley

Commissioner

Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children's life prospects are not limited by their disabilities but by our willingness to provide them with the early and intensive interventions they need to thrive. The vast majority of students with disabilities can reach the same high standards as other children given the right instruction and support.

Investing in high-quality early interventions for children with disabilities pays off. Studies have found that it reduces later spending on grade repetition, juvenile justice, and welfare. It also raises the likelihood that a child will go on to gainful employment and contribute to society. Research demonstrates the importance of early intervention to ensure that children are on the right path from the start. Language development in the first five years of a child's life has been shown to dramatically impact later reading achievement.

Improving the education of children with disabilities is an investment in their future and our city's long-term prosperity. Succeeding at this task is a matter of political will, good planning, and a strategic use of resources.

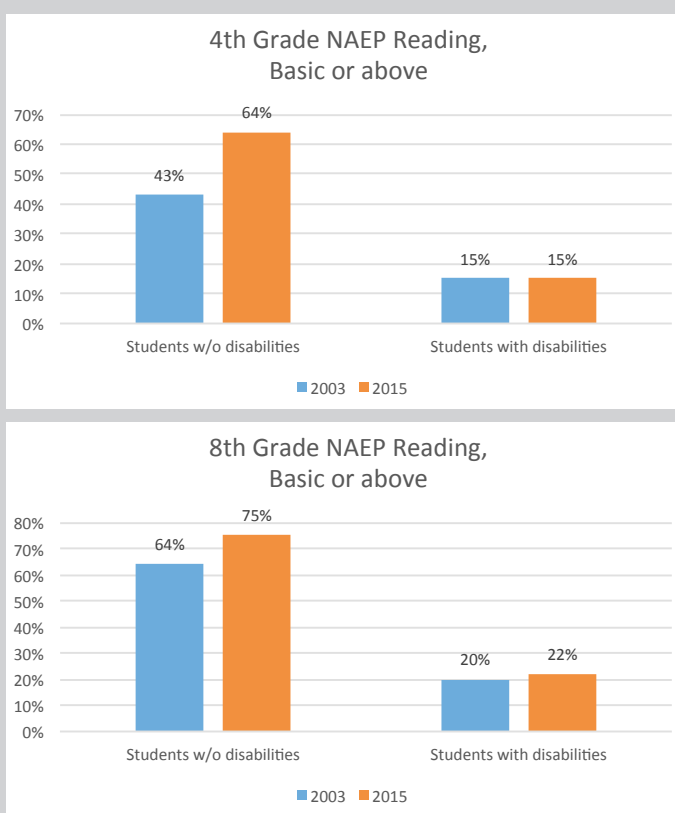
Chicago Public School students with Individualized Education Programs number over 57,000 and make up 14 percent of total enrollment. The achievement gaps between these young people and their peers are wide and persistent.

The reading progress of CPS elementary students with disabilities stagnated between 2003 and 2015, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In 4th grade, students with disabilities on average made no progress at all. Only 15 percent of them scored at or above the "Basic" level in 2003 and 2015. During those years, the percentage of 8th-graders with disabilities reaching at least the "Basic" level rose only two percentage points, from 20 percent to 22 percent.

### GROWING READING ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The achievement gap between Chicago Public School students with and without disabilities widened between 2003 and 2015, according to their results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP.)

Percentages of CPS Students with Disabilities VS. CPS Students Without Disabilities Scoring at "Basic" or above Reading on the NAEP, 2003 and 2015



Source: Chicago Public Schools

While CPS special education achievement flat-lined, overall reading gains for its 4th and 8th-graders soared. Between 2003 and 2015, the percentage of CPS students scoring at basic or above in reading on the NAEP rose from 40 percent to 58 percent in 4th grade and 59 percent to 67 percent in 8th grade.

Results on the new state PARCC exam for students with disabilities are likewise sobering. In 2015, only 4.3 percent of CPS students with IEPs in grades 3-8 reached

proficiency in language arts. That percentage was only 2 percent for high school students with IEPs.

In 2015, the Chicago region came together to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act by advancing initiatives that would promote the inclusion of people with disabilities. The ADA 25 Chicago Steering Committee identified literacy achievement gaps for people with disabilities as a major barrier to participation in the workplace and in community life. Mayor Rahm Emanuel agreed, and in November 2015 he attended the ADA 25 Chicago Disability Inclusion Opportunity Summit to announce creation of a task force to improve literacy for children with disabilities.

The Mayor's ADA 25 Literacy Task Force—which includes staff from city agencies and Chicago Public Schools, principals and teachers, early education and literacy experts, and disability rights advocates—chose to focus its recommendations on developing strong literacy skills from birth through 3rd grade to lay the foundation for school and workplace success. As a preliminary goal, the Task Force proposes that CPS and the other city systems that support children with disabilities aim to reduce the reading achievement gap for 3rd-graders with disabilities by half by 2021.

To reach that goal, the Task Force arrived at three priorities followed by specific recommendations for improving literacy achievement for students with IEPs:

### **PRIORITY 1: Strengthen the teaching of language and literacy to all children from birth to 3rd grade, especially those with reading difficulties.**

- Select one or two high-quality reading programs for use in the early grades throughout Chicago Public Schools.
- Identify an effective set of instructional tools for interventions for struggling readers for use in every Chicago public elementary school.
- Ensure that every pre-k to 3rd grade teacher in Chicago public elementary schools receives intensive, on-going professional development in early literacy instruction and reading interventions.

- Engage parents to support their children's language and literacy development from birth to 3rd grade .
- Increase mental health support to children from birth to 3rd grade.

### **PRIORITY 2: Improve the way that schools identify and support students in pre-kindergarten to 3rd grade who struggle with reading, especially those with disabilities.**

- Implement a universal assessment for identifying reading difficulties in grades K-3.
- Ensure that every elementary school has in place an effective Multi-Tiered System of Supports.
- Update the evaluation process for identifying specific learning disabilities to be consistent with research and federal and state guidelines.
- Improve the quality of pre-k to 3rd grade special education services in Chicago Public Schools.

### **PRIORITY 3: Improve the delivery of services to students with disabilities from birth to preschool.**

- Improve data-sharing between City of Chicago early learning systems and State of Illinois birth to age three Early Intervention.
- Support parents in scaffolding their children's language development from birth to age three.
- Provide special education services on-site to children enrolled in city-funded community preschool programs.
- Give children with disabilities equal access to full-day pre-kindergarten.
- Change pre-kindergarten staffing structures to provide more access to students with disabilities.

## PREFACE

Children's life prospects are not limited by their disabilities but by our willingness to provide them with the early, appropriate and intensive support and intervention they need to thrive. The vast majority of students with disabilities can reach the same levels of achievement as other children given the right instruction and support.

Investing in high-quality early intervention for children with disabilities pays off. Studies have found that high quality early care and education reduces later spending on grade repetition, juvenile justice, and welfare. It also raises the likelihood that a child will go on to gainful employment and contribute to society. Research demonstrates the importance of early intervention to ensure that children are on the right path from the start. Language development in the first five years of a child's life has been shown to dramatically impact later reading achievement.

Improving the education of children with disabilities is an investment in their future and our city's long-term prosperity. Succeeding at this task is a matter of political will, good planning, and a strategic use of resources.

Chicago Public School students with Individualized Education Programs number over 57,000 and make up 14 percent of total enrollment. The achievement gaps between these young people and their peers are wide and persistent.

The progress of CPS elementary students with disabilities in reading stagnated between 2003 and 2015, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In 4th grade, students with disabilities on average made no progress at all. Only 15 percent of them scored at or above the "Basic" level in 2003 and 2015. During those years, the percentage of 8th-graders with disabilities reaching at least the "Basic" level rose only two percentage points, from 20 percent to 22 percent.

While CPS special education achievement flat-lined, reading gains for CPS 4th and 8th-graders without

disabilities soared. Between 2003 and 2015, the percentage of non-disabled CPS students scoring at basic or above in reading on the NAEP rose from 43 percent to 64 percent in 4th grade and from 64 percent to 75 percent in 8th grade.

Results on the new state PARCC exam for students with disabilities are likewise sobering. In 2015, only 4.3 percent of CPS students with IEPs in grades 3-8 reached proficiency in language arts. That percentage was only 2 percent for high school students with IEPs.

In 2015, the Chicago region came together to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act by advancing initiatives that would promote the inclusion of people with disabilities. The ADA 25 Chicago Steering Committee identified literacy achievement gaps for people with disabilities as a major barrier to participation in the workplace and in community life. Mayor Rahm Emanuel agreed, and in November 2015 he attended the ADA 25 Chicago Disability Inclusion Opportunity Summit to announce the creation of a task force to improve literacy for children with disabilities:

*"Economic and educational empowerment for people with disabilities is the next frontier in the fight for equal access. Today we have an unacceptable achievement gap of 43 percent in terms of reading proficiency between students with and without disabilities. [The Task Force] will identify the causes of this gap, develop a set of recommendations that are realistic and aggressive for closing it and identify a mechanism to measure the results in our student progress."*

## SETTING PRIORITIES

Most students with disabilities struggle with reading and writing, and these are skills that underlie success in all academic subjects. Research has found that students who are proficient readers by the end of 3rd grade are four times more likely to graduate high school on time than those who are not proficient. Research also indicates

that literacy skills begin in the earliest years, through exposure to language and literacy rich environments and developmentally appropriate, yet academically rigorous, early care and education that provides children with the skills they need to be successful readers by 3rd grade.

The Mayor’s ADA 25 Literacy Task Force—which includes staff from city agencies and Chicago Public Schools, principals and teachers, early education and literacy experts, and disability rights advocates—arrived at three priorities for improving the reading achievement of students with disabilities by the end of 3rd grade.

**PRIORITY 1: Strengthen the teaching of language and literacy to all children from birth to 3rd grade, especially those who struggle with reading.**

Improving special education services alone won’t close the reading achievement gap left by weak early language and literacy instruction in the early years. Once a child is found eligible for specialized services, many students continue to spend the majority of their time in general education settings. Even with specialized education support, weak core instruction can continue to slow their progress.

**PRIORITY 2: Improve the way that schools identify and support students in pre-kindergarten to 3rd grade who struggle with reading, especially those with disabilities.**

Schools need support to use research-based methods to diagnose language and reading difficulties early and to provide appropriate interventions for students with disabilities.

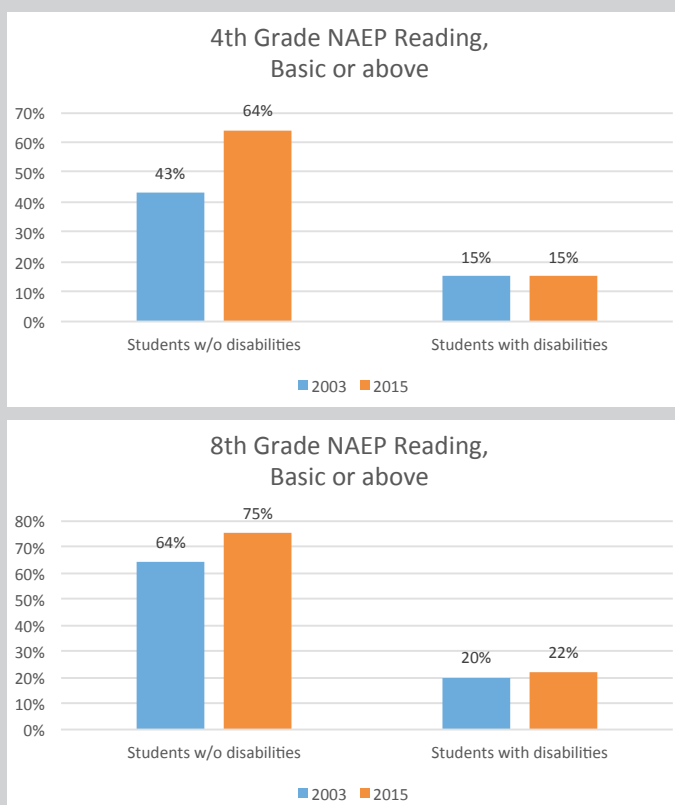
**PRIORITY 3: Improve the delivery of services to students with disabilities from birth to preschool.**

Many systems are in place to identify and support children with disabilities, but these systems must work in harmony to truly provide effective services to families. In addition, as the city expands services for Chicago’s youngest learners, children with disabilities must be given priority and support to access these services.

## GROWING READING ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The achievement gap between Chicago Public School students with and without disabilities widened between 2003 and 2015, according to their results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP.)

Percentages of CPS Students with Disabilities VS. CPS Students Without Disabilities Scoring at “Basic” or above Reading on the NAEP, 2003 and 2015



Source: Chicago Public Schools

## MEETING THE CHALLENGE

This report describes specific recommendations for meeting each of the Task Force priorities. As a preliminary goal, the Task Force proposes that CPS and the other city systems that support children with disabilities aim to reduce the reading achievement gap for 3rd-graders with disabilities by half by 2021.

To meet that goal, the City of Chicago Early Learning Executive Council should be charged with ensuring that the recommendations described below are carried out. As needed, it should convene experts, including parents, school and district staff, to gather data and further refine these recommendations.



The Task Force strongly urges that where possible its proposals be rolled out gradually, beginning in targeted schools and neighborhoods, rather than all at once city-wide. Too many education initiatives, not just locally but nationally, are launched on a grand scale but ultimately fail because of poor implementation. Schools will need high-quality, on-going professional development to adopt new practices successfully. Especially at a time of severe financial constraints, it's better to invest in launching fewer successful, long-lasting efforts than in many mediocre ones that soon fade away.

## WHO IS ENTITLED TO RECEIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES?

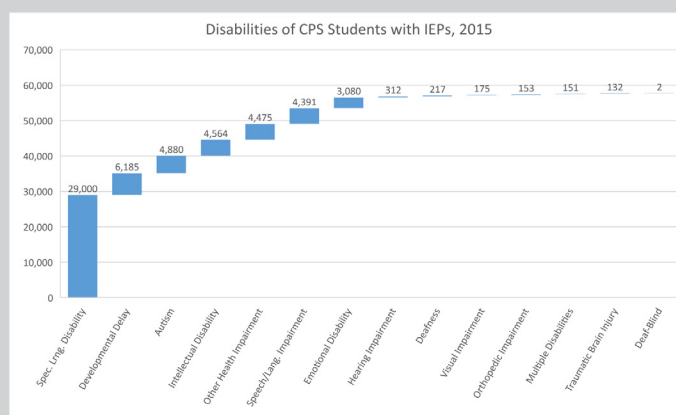
Two major federal laws pertain to students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) applies to students who have one or more of the 14 disabilities defined under the Act and who are found to need special education. These students receive an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

The second federal law, Section 504, applies to students who have a mental or physical impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities but are not found to need special education in order to progress academically. These students—who receive a Section 504, plan—may only require accommodations (such as larger print size or more time to complete tests) or related services (such as nursing) to benefit from an education.

The Task Force recommendations apply to all school-aged students with disabilities through grade 3, but in particular to those with IEPs. This spring, Chicago Public Schools enrolled over 56,000 students with IEPs and 14,000 students with 504 plans. In the chart below is a breakdown of enrollment by disability type for students with IEPs.

A specific learning disability is the most common disability type, and students in this category make up just over half of all CPS students with IEPs. A specific learning disability is a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language that may result in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. Dyslexia is the best known example of a type of specific learning disability.

## CPS ENROLLMENT



Source: Chicago Public Schools

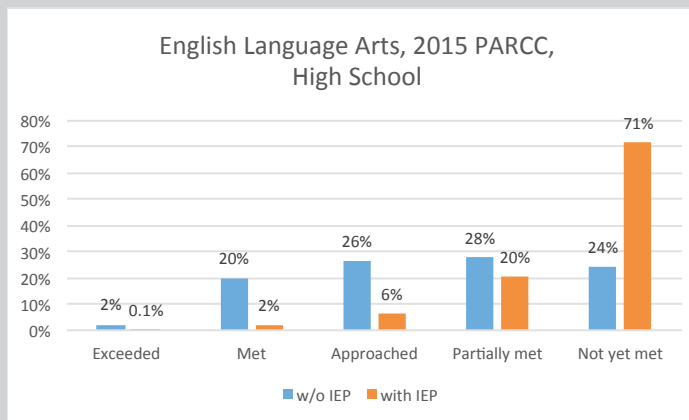
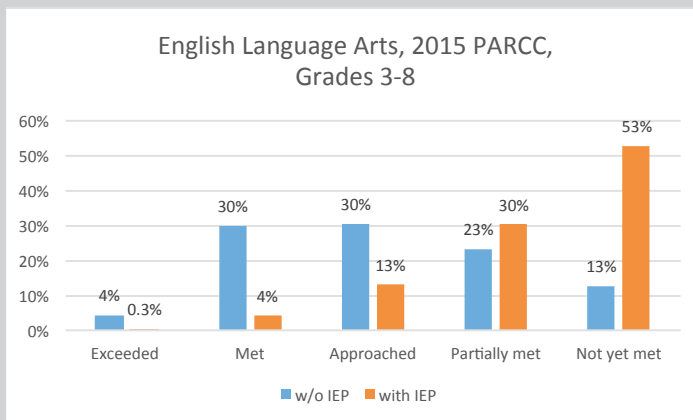
Even the best thought-out initiative likely is destined for failure in a school that lacks strong leadership and a culture of trust and cooperation among faculty. The city and district should invest first in improving literacy and special education in schools with staff who are equipped and ready to implement new strategies well. Priority should also be given to schools in networks with leaders who are skilled at guiding and supporting schools to improve. As a matter of fairness, schools and networks serving the highest concentrations of poverty and students with disabilities should also be given preference. Successful efforts in high-needs areas of the city can serve as models for other schools.

Achieving the three priorities described here will not remove every obstacle to achievement for students with disabilities. One urgent need outside the scope of this report is to improve undergraduate teacher education. While Illinois requires that university programs preparing elementary teacher candidates instruct them in specific research-based practices for teaching reading, most programs in Illinois are falling short, according to a recent study by the National Council on Teacher Quality. The Illinois State Board of Education must step-up monitoring of university teacher preparation programs and enforce state standards so that more teachers enter the profession well-prepared to teach literacy, especially to students who struggle with reading.

## STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES FAR FROM PROFICIENT

The performance of Chicago Public School students with disabilities on the state PARCC exam fell far below the achievement of other CPS students in English/language arts.

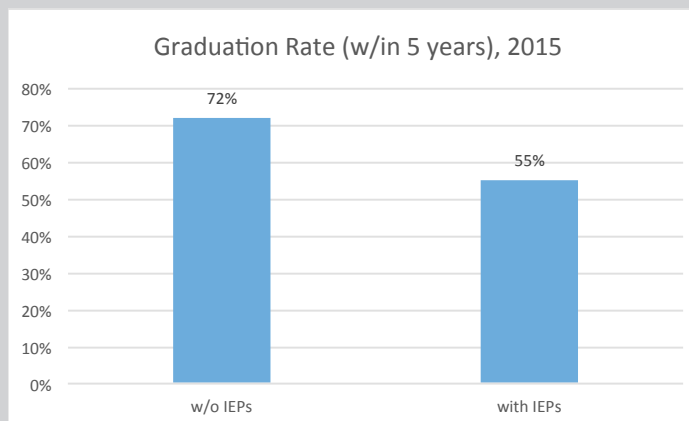
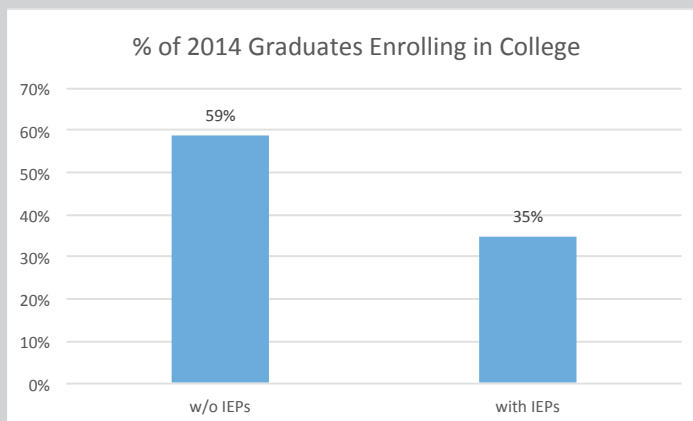
### 2015 PARCC RESULTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS



Source: Chicago Public Schools

## DIPLOMA GAPS

CPS students with disabilities are much less likely than their peers to graduate high school and to enroll in college.



Source: Chicago Public Schools

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **PRIORITY 1: STRENGTHEN THE TEACHING OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY TO ALL CHILDREN FROM BIRTH TO 3RD GRADE, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO STRUGGLE WITH READING.**

Many children who struggle to read have simply lacked adequate early language and literacy support and instruction. Raising the quality of language and literacy instruction for all children would greatly reduce the number of students who need remediation later on and would likely reduce unnecessary special education referrals.

Most students with disabilities do not receive specialized services for the majority of the day, and supplemental services can't make up for a weak core literacy program. Any efforts to improve the reading achievement of students with disabilities in the 3rd grade must build from strong early language and literacy supports for all children.

#### ***RECOMMENDATION 1A: Select one or two high-quality reading programs for use in the early grades throughout Chicago Public Schools.***

Chicago values local school autonomy and its public schools are largely free to select their own instructional materials, including reading programs. Unlike many other large urban districts that use a common reading program in the primary grades, Chicago elementary schools use dozens. Narrowing the selection of programs would benefit schools and students for a number of reasons.

It would ensure that all programs were using evidence-based, high quality materials. Many standard basal reading text books claim to be "research-based" but are in fact never rigorously tested in classrooms to see if they improve literacy achievement. CPS should limit the selection to programs that have been proven effective. The selected program should also align well with the standard literacy curriculum and materials used in all CPS pre-kindergarten classrooms.

A common literacy program would benefit mobile students. Many high-poverty CPS elementary schools see a quarter to a half of their students transfer in or out during the school year, according to district data. A consistent reading program would ease the transition for these students and lessen their confusion. The routines and approaches would be more familiar and teachers would be able to draw more easily on a students' prior learning to help them master new content. Students would also be less likely to miss important skills.

When all schools in the district or the same region use a common program, professional development can be provided by the district across many schools. While individual schools may achieve great results using a variety of approaches, raising achievement in more than 400 elementary schools simultaneously would be less expensive and more easily achieved with one or two common programs.

#### ***RECOMMENDATION 1B: Identify an effective set of instructional interventions with struggling readers for use in every Chicago public elementary school.***

When children struggle with reading, teachers are often at a loss for how to help. In addition to a strong core reading program, every teacher needs effective reading intervention programs to help students who have ongoing difficulty. Some intervention programs target specific areas of literacy such as phonics, reading fluency, spelling, writing, or reading comprehension. Other programs are more comprehensive and cover many skills. These programs can supplement the core program in the classroom or be used by a reading specialist or other school staff for small groups of children who need more intensive intervention and may also be a part of special education reading instruction. Chicago Public Schools should select intervention programs that research has found to be effective and ensure that elementary schools are able to provide them to every struggling reader in pre-kindergarten to 3rd grade.

***RECOMMENDATION 1C: Ensure that every pre-k to 3rd grade teacher receives intensive, on-going professional development in literacy instruction and reading interventions.***

Once teachers are equipped with high-quality core instructional materials, they still need on-going support to put them to optimal use. Teachers need to know how to use data from student assessments to plan small group instruction, monitor progress daily, and reteach or change strategies when children struggle. For students who need more targeted intervention to master decoding, reading fluency, vocabulary, comprehension or other aspects of literacy, teachers need to select and use appropriate instructional materials.

To master all of these skills and routines, teachers need professional development. A national study by Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University found 90 percent of teachers reporting that professional development had not improved their teaching skills. But research also finds that professional development makes an enormous difference when it's done well.

Providing coaching from a specialist who models lessons in the classroom, observes instruction and provides teachers with feedback can significantly increase the percent of teachers who successfully implement new strategies, studies have shown. Nearly as effective is peer-coaching, where teachers meet frequently in small groups to discuss the approaches learned in workshops and plan lessons together.

Chicago Public Schools must ensure that every school has a plan to provide this level of high-quality professional development and coaching to its pre-k-3 teachers in elementary schools, including special education teachers. Publishers of reading programs may provide some professional development, but this alone will not be sufficient to improve teaching practice. A school plan might include professional development from their CPS network office, from university partners or from expert teachers at the school. The plan should also include on-going coaching from specialists or peers to master new instructional materials, monitor student progress, organize small group instruction, and provide interventions that match student needs. Principals and other school

instructional leaders must be included in this professional development so that they know how to supervise and support their teachers in learning these skills.

***RECOMMENDATION 1D: Engage parents to support their children's language and literacy development from birth to 3rd grade.***

Parents are children's first and most important teachers. The City of Chicago should identify strategies for engaging parents to support their children's literacy development, drawing on the Chicago Park District, museums, zoos, and Chicago Public Libraries. The city should then collaborate to create, fund, and cross-promote activities and programs that teach parents how strengthen their children's reading and writing skills. Busy parents may need support to ensure that their young children are getting the kind of language and literacy rich environments that have been long-demonstrated to lead to later reading achievement. Many resources and programs exist throughout Chicago, and the city should look to identify and scale-up programs that have been shown to be effective.

***RECOMMENDATION 1E: Increase mental health support to children from birth to 3rd grade.***

Many learning challenges stem from mental health issues, particularly if a child has experienced trauma caused by abuse, neglect, witnessing violence, or other stressors such as poverty. Children experiencing trauma may act out or withdraw or have difficulty concentrating in school. When mental health needs go unmet, children can fail to benefit from even the best literacy instruction.

Teachers and school staff need to learn how to manage the behavior of traumatized children and support their social and emotional growth. "Trauma-informed" approaches to discipline can include talking calmly instead of reprimanding and providing closer supervision instead of sending a student from the room. Supporting the social and emotional skill development of young children can also prevent them from being misdiagnosed with an emotional disability because of problem behaviors.

To reduce the risk of misdiagnosis and promote children's school success, every CPS school, community preschool



and birth to age 3 program in Chicago needs mental health consultants who can observe classrooms and provide guidance to teachers and staff on how to identify and support traumatized children. The city needs to identify where mental health consultations are already taking place and then arrange additional partnerships and funding as necessary so that all children are well and equitably supported.

**PRIORITY 2: IMPROVE THE WAY THAT SCHOOLS IDENTIFY AND SUPPORT STUDENTS IN PRE-KINDERGARTEN TO 3RD GRADE WHO STRUGGLE WITH READING, ESPECIALLY THOSE WITH DISABILITIES.**

Even with the best reading instruction, some children will need more intensive help to learn to read well. CPS elementary schools need a better system for identifying struggling readers so that they get the intervention they need beginning in pre-kindergarten. For those who continue to struggle, schools need to adopt methods supported by research to identify learning disabilities. Once identified as eligible for special education, students need higher-quality IEPs and instruction and more frequent progress monitoring than most schools are currently providing.

**RECOMMENDATION 2A: Create a universal system for identifying reading difficulties in grades K-3.**

Chicago Public Schools requires that all district elementary schools use a common early literacy assessment for students in kindergarten through 2nd grade. Schools are able to select the assessment tool or set of tools that best aligns to their instructional context. Most schools opt to use one of two district-supported assessment tools: Amplify Reading 3D, also known as TRC/DIBELS (Text Reading and Comprehension and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills), or the NWEA MAP for Primary Grades (MPG) Reading assessment.

Using different methods to identify reading difficulties in a district with high student mobility is problematic. Many low-income schools, the same ones that serve children with the most severe reading difficulties, see

large numbers of students transfer in and out during the school year. If a child's previous school uses a different assessment, teachers at the new school are less able to interpret those results and put them to use.

Chicago Public Schools should require one reading assessment for use at every CPS elementary school in grades K-3, aligned with preschool assessments. The test should be administered three times a year to track students' progress until at least 3rd grade to ensure that children who struggle with basic reading skills continue to be diagnosed and monitored.

**RECOMMENDATION 2B: Ensure that every elementary school has in place an effective Multi-Tiered System of Supports.**

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a strategy promoted by the U.S. Department of Education to provide all students with the level of academic or social-emotional support they need to be successful. Schools are to identify three "tiers" of students with those in "Tier 1" needing only core instruction and those in "Tier 2" and "Tier 3" needing increasingly intensive supports. Students who fail to progress satisfactorily in "Tier 3," which might include frequent interventions from a reading specialist or other personnel, are often evaluated for special education services. Since 2010-11, Illinois has mandated that all schools use a system like MTSS to help identify specific learning disabilities.

Chicago principals were introduced to MTSS at network meetings in summer 2015. Some pursued the strategy and now have full systems in place, but many others do not, according to Task Force members who work at the CPS central office. Further training is scheduled for summer 2016. The district needs to ensure that schools that do not yet have MTSS in place get the appropriate follow-up monitoring and support from their networks to implement them well.

A good system begins with data. Each fall students are screened for reading difficulties, and at some schools, for social/emotional problems. Data should also include examples of student work and interviews with the student. Teachers may also note issues such as lack of

motivation, absences, academic difficulties, anxiety, or problem behaviors.

An MTSS team—which should include general and special education teachers, administrators, reading specialists, and social workers or other related service providers—reviews student data. A team member observes the student’s classroom multiple times to ensure that academic or behavioral difficulties aren’t due to poor instruction or classroom management. If the student is determined to need extra help, the team discusses academic or behavioral interventions. This might include additional small group lessons focused on the specific area of difficulty, such as decoding words or, for a disruptive student, coaching to manage anger and resolve conflicts. A student’s progress is monitored as often as every two weeks. If the student fails to progress, he or she may need interventions that are more frequent, different or delivered in a smaller group.

Parents must be kept informed of their child’s progress throughout the MTSS process and should be encouraged to participate in creating the intervention plan. During an initial meeting, the child’s teacher should provide them with a pamphlet on MTSS (available in seven major languages) and their right to request a special education evaluation at any time. The teacher should then report to them biweekly on their child’s progress. After two months, if the student has still failed to progress, the MTSS team should meet with parents to discuss next steps, which may include a special education evaluation.

An effective MTSS system can be challenging to implement. Schools need to understand what constitutes appropriate Tier 2 or Tier 3 reading interventions. Providing them with a set of instructional interventions and professional development (as described in Recommendations 1a and 1b) is a good place to start. Schools also need to figure out how much time students need for interventions, who should deliver them, and what skills or training they need. Schools may also need guidance on how to use the data from diagnostic tools to identify student needs, how to assess student progress, and how to intensify supports when students fail to meet those goals.

***RECOMMENDATION 2C: Update the evaluation process for identifying specific learning disabilities to be consistent with research and federal and state guidelines.***

Many of the city’s public schools continue to follow an outdated method for identifying specific learning disabilities, according to the CPS Office of Diverse Learner Supports and Services. Under the old approach, a psychologist administers both an IQ test and an academic achievement test. When the IQ score is average or above average and also much higher than the achievement test score, a child is diagnosed as having a specific learning disability.

Thirty years of research has since confirmed that this is not always an accurate way to diagnose a specific learning disability. A more reliable method is to look at multiple sources of information including the results of interventions offered through the MTSS process. Children who underperform on a reading assessment are monitored frequently to see how they respond to increasingly intense, research-based interventions targeted at their specific area of difficulty. Those who fail to progress may be found to have a specific learning disability and receive special education services.

Since 2010, the Illinois Board of Education has required schools to use a system like MTSS as part of an evaluation to diagnose specific learning disabilities. Although IQ testing is optional, it cannot be used alone. However, Chicago schools continue to rely on the outdated model and school psychologists continue to administer IQ tests.



Chicago Public Schools must exert leadership to transition schools and psychologists to the new method of diagnosis supported by research and mandated by ISBE. Schools will also need on-site coaching to organize an effective MTSS.

***RECOMMENDATION 2D: Improve the quality of pre-k to 3rd grade special education instruction in Chicago public elementary schools.***

Special education services should be the last, most individualized, and intensive strategy to address a child's reading difficulties. Yet the teaching of children with disabilities often focuses on procedural compliance with federal mandates rather than a well-structured, concerted effort to help a child overcome obstacles and meet ambitious goals.

The poor quality of IEPs is a national issue. Although some Chicago elementary schools do an outstanding job with their IEPs, many others set low or unmeasurable goals, according to the CPS Office of Diverse Learner Supports and Services.

Despite the continued low achievement of students with disabilities, district special education administrators who review IEPs rarely find special education teams reporting that an IEP goal has not been met. Adding to the problem, many special education teachers who work with small groups of students in a resource room or in an all-day self-contained special education classroom are left on their own to develop curriculum and choose instructional materials.

CPS needs first to ensure that students with disabilities receive core English language arts instruction that is tailored to their individual needs. The district must also provide schools with a set of supplemental instructional interventions shown effective in accelerating the literacy skills of students with disabilities. Teachers then will need professional development on using the materials, as described in Recommendation 1b.

Next, special education teachers, general education teachers and service providers, such as speech/language therapists and occupational therapists, need further professional development on writing ambitious

and measurable IEP goals. Principals will also need training on how to evaluate the quality of IEP goals and special education instruction.

As a further support, CPS should provide guidance through the on-line district system that teachers use to complete IEPs. The system could be designed to prompt teachers, for example, to review existing data on student performance and set measurable goals.

Special education teachers also need an on-line system that helps them track student progress towards meeting IEP goals. Frequent progress monitoring would allow teachers and IEP teams to see if interventions are working and what additional support students might need. An online system would allow school, network, and district administrators to monitor the progress of a school's special education instruction and identify weak areas where teachers need further professional development.

Parents, too, need to play a role in supporting their children's progress. Unfortunately, parents often are left feeling intimidated or confused at IEP meetings when faced by a room of teachers and specialists using unfamiliar terms. Often parents first receive the lengthy IEP plan at the meeting with no time for careful review.

To better include and inform parents, schools must share proposed IEPs well in advance of the meeting date. At each meeting, the district representative who attends should appoint a school IEP team member to serve as parent liaison. The liaison can ensure that the parent understands the IEP process, has a chance to advise the team and ask questions, and that their advice is listened to and their questions fully answered.

**PRIORITY 3: IMPROVE THE DELIVERY OF SERVICES TO STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES FROM BIRTH TO PRESCHOOL.**

Many systems are in place to identify and support children with disabilities, but these systems must work in harmony to truly provide effective services to families. In addition, as the city pursues strategic priorities to expand services for Chicago's youngest learners, the needs of children with disabilities must be a priority.

Improving the quality of early intervention services from birth to preschool will lay a stronger foundation for future learning.

***Recommendation 3a: Improve data-sharing between City of Chicago early learning systems and State of Illinois birth to age three Early Intervention.***

Chicago evaluates thousands of infants and toddlers each year to see if they are eligible for state-funded Early Intervention services. Those found eligible are provided with Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSP) that define intended outcomes, intervention strategies, and the minutes per week of various services, such as speech and language therapy or occupational therapy. But there is currently no system to evaluate the long-term results of these eligibility and IFSP decisions. Were children found ineligible referred to special education later on, missing out on years worth of needed interventions? Does a certain intensity or combination of services before the age of three result, on average, in better literacy achievement later on or reduce the services children later require?

Research that answered these and other questions could inform and improve early intervention decisions, leading to better outcomes for kids over time. To make such research possible, children's electronic records from the state's Child and Family Connections offices, which managed birth to three Early Intervention, need to be linked with their electronic student records in the CPS database.

Efforts to do so are already underway. The state is designing a database that merges individual records for children in various publicly funded childcare and preschool programs. These include childcare programs subsidized by the Department of Human Services, Early Intervention, Preschool for All, and Head Start.

The Illinois Early Learning Council and the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development are already discussing the research questions that the database might be designed to answer. The City of Chicago Early Learning Executive Council should ensure that the research agenda is also aimed at improving Early

Intervention for children with disabilities in Chicago.

***Recommendation 3b: Support parents in scaffolding their children's language development from birth to age three.***

The foundation for a strong literacy skills is laid in early childhood. Researchers Betty Risley and Todd Hart of the University of Kansas in a now-famous study found that the number of vocabulary words acquired by age 3 is strongly predictive of measures of language and literacy skill at ages 9-10, including standardized reading comprehension tests.

Chicago already has programs underway that teach parents how to interact with young children in a way that builds their vocabulary and literacy skills. One example is The 30 Million Words initiative developed by a research team at the University of Chicago. The curriculum has been delivered through eight one-hour home visits. The City of Chicago should fund evidence-based programs like this that serve and support parents to create language and literacy rich environment for their children in ways that have been shown to increase early literacy skills.

***Recommendation 3c: Provide special education services on-site to children enrolled in city-funded community preschool programs.***

Children with IEPs who are enrolled in one of 250 city-funded community preschools are entitled to special education instruction and services through the district. To receive these services, children must currently leave their community preschools and travel to a CPS school. This causes additional transitions for young children and does not support high-quality specialized services for children in the location where they spend the majority of their day.

CPS should provide specialized services on-site at community preschools. This would prevent the loss of valuable learning time to travel. It would also allow special education teachers to work more closely with classroom teachers on how to best support children with disabilities and enhance their learning throughout the school day.



***Recommendation 3d: Give children with disabilities equal access to full-day pre-kindergarten.***

To better prepare children for success in kindergarten and beyond, the City of Chicago will expand the number of full-day pre-kindergarten programs. The city and CPS must identify and remove any barriers to enrolling children with disabilities in these full-day programs. As the city works to increase access to full-day programming, consideration must be given to the learning and development needs of children with disabilities, along with mechanisms for ensuring support can be provided to children for the entirety of their school day.

***Recommendation 3e: Change pre-kindergarten staffing structures to provide more access to students with disabilities***

Currently, pre-kindergarten children with disabilities are limited to preschool programs that have teachers with the appropriate credentials. Typically they are enrolled in classrooms co-taught by a special education and general education teacher with assistance from a teacher aide. To increase enrollment options as Chicago expands more of its preschool programs from half-day to full-day, CPS should consider changing the staffing of its pre-kindergarten classrooms so that they are taught by a single teacher with certification in both special and general education with assistance from an aide.

Moving to a new staffing model should be done gradually. The district should first pilot the model in a limited number of classrooms.

If the pilots are successful, CPS will need a well thought-out, multi-year transition plan that includes incentives for more teachers to become dually certified and to accept positions as pre-kindergarten teachers.

The district will also need to ensure that children with disabilities continue to be well-supported as inclusion classrooms move from two teachers to one. First, students needing specific services such as speech and language therapy or occupational therapy must continue to receive them from qualified specialists. Second, the percentage

of special education students in each classroom which is capped at 30 percent by state law should be reduced as much as possible without denying services to students who need them. Third, teachers and paraprofessionals will need high-quality classroom materials and on-going professional development to tailor instruction and activities to a wide range of needs.

## CONCLUSION

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Early, high-quality interventions for children with disabilities can lay the foundation for later success in college, in employment and in life. The Mayor must lead the city in coordinating its resources and providing effective interventions to strengthen the teaching of language and literacy to all students from birth to 3rd grade, improve interventions for those at risk for reading failure—especially children with disabilities—and upgrade the coordination and delivery of intervention services in early childhood. If these priorities are pursued with urgency, the four year-olds attending public preschools in Chicago this fall will have closed half the reading achievement gap with their non-disabled peers by the time they complete 3rd grade in 2021. Meeting that goal is only a first step towards the full inclusion of Chicagoans with disabilities in the workplace and community life, but it's a vital one that demands the full and immediate attention of our city.

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## NOTES

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<sup>4</sup> Thurlow et al., 5.

<sup>5</sup> Diefendorf and Goode, 1-9.

<sup>6</sup> Hart and Risley, 4-9.

<sup>7</sup> Donald J. Hernandez, *Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD (2012): 4, accessed May 26, 2016, <http://gradelevelreading.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Double-Jeopardy-Report-030812-for-web1.pdf>.

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